Expanding Horizons builds foundation for a One Health career

By Carly Hodes
Just as Dr. Steve Osofsky ’89 helped shape the vision of the Expanding Horizons program at its inception, the grants he received through it as a Cornell veterinary student helped shape his worldview and career. The ideas for what a summer experiential learning program could entail that he discussed as a student with S. Gordon Campbell, then the associate dean for academic affairs and director of international programs, spawned the Expanding Horizons program, which funds Cornell veterinary students to experience veterinary medicine in developing countries or other places outside the typical practice mold. It has grown over the years to empower hundreds of veterinary students to explore the wider world and the multitude of roles veterinarians can play in improving animal, human, and environmental health.

Pioneering the program, Dr. Osofsky received the first ever Expanding Horizons grant— to assist a researcher running an elephant project in Kenya.

“What turned out to be so valuable that summer of 1986 was what went wrong—not what went right,” he said. “I saw firsthand what happens when an expatriate researcher disregards local knowledge and sensibilities. From a failed research protocol to most of the foreign research team being hospitalized for malaria, that summer was an unforgettable lesson in what not to do.”

Luckily for Steve, he had taken the proper precautions and did not fall ill, and was able to help his fallen colleagues get to a hospital.

He embarked on a second Expanding Horizons project in the summer of 1987, apprenticing himself to the Florida Panther Project. Working across the Everglades and other parts of Florida, the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission was trying to save the last of Florida’s panthers. The level of respect the team showed for the elusive panthers left a deep impression on him.

“My mentor saw every opportunity to handle a panther as an honor, never forgetting that our patients never visit us by choice,” said Dr. Osofsky. “The highest standards of care and handling were upheld, despite our often working in the wilderness. The lessons I learned that summer have stayed with me throughout my career.”

In 1988 he earned a third Expanding Horizons fellowship for a zoological experience at a major U.S. zoo, one that ended-up experiencing serious management problems that led staff veterinarians to curtail normal work schedules. Undeterred, Dr. Osofsky turned the problem into an opportunity. The keepers were desperate for assistance, giving Dr. Osofsky the chance to evaluate and draw blood from a baby orangutan, examine a newborn tiger cub, and conduct other hands-on zoological work. Dr. Osofsky is quick to note that “No animals were harmed in the making of that preceptorship!”
TEACHING

“In envisioning Expanding Horizons, Dean Campbell wanted to foster students’ internal reflection and self-awareness in the context of being global citizens. He wanted Cornell students to consider the full range of opportunities our training represents, and to understand the importance of using veterinary medicine to really help people, animals and the environment that sustains us all.”

Today, Dr. Osofsky continues to work with the kinds of challenges Expanding Horizons helped prepare him for. As Executive Director of the Wildlife Conservation Society’s (WCS) Wildlife Health & Health Policy program, he oversees all of the WCS Global Conservation Program’s work related to health. He joined WCS in 2002 as its first Senior Policy Advisor for Wildlife Health. Before that, he had served as the World Wildlife Fund’s Director of Field Support for species programs in Asia and Africa, worked as a zoological veterinarian, and was the first Wildlife Veterinary Officer for the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks. He has also served as an American Association for the Advancement of Science Biodiversity Program Specialist at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Dr. Osofsky developed the Animal & Human Health for the Environment And Development (AHEAD) Program (wcs-ahead.org), one of the foundational components of the WCS ‘One World, One Health’ umbrella initiative, which he helped launch in 2004. He also recently established a new interdisciplinary global program called Health & Ecosystems: Analysis of Linkages (wces-heal.org).

An adjunct assistant professor at the University of Maryland, he regularly counsels veterinary students from around the world, including many Cornell students applying for Expanding Horizons funding, about how to maximize their time in school and design valuable international experiences.

“In envisioning Expanding Horizons, Dean Campbell wanted to foster students’ internal reflection and self-awareness in the
context of being global citizens,” said Dr. Osofsky. “He wanted Cornell students to consider the full range of opportunities our training represents, and to understand the importance of using veterinary medicine to really help people, animals and the environment that sustains us all. I remain forever grateful to Dr. Campbell for his clearly ‘One Health’ vision, although there was no such term at the time.”